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CIA church group in Honduras

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Lempira province, Honduras

While the Salvadoran civil war rages on just miles away, a different, but related battle has been joined in this remote Honduran countryside.

Here in the hot, overcrowded camps of Lempira housing thousands of El Salvador refugees, deeply conservative U.S. Christian fundamentalism has come head up against the theology of liberation espoused by many grassroots priests and nuns. At the center of the controversy are CARITAS, a Swiss-based Catholic humanitarian agency; and World Vision, a fundamentalist, anticommunist Christian relief organization based in Monrovia, Calif.

Catholic and mainstream Protestant relief officials here and in the United States say that the government effort to stifle dissent with a mixture of fundamentalist Christianity, conservative American ideology and an open assault on the theology of liberation, is well suited to the philosophy of the fundamentalists, in particular the group World Vision.

"World Vision has helped sensitize Americans to the fact that there are terrible problems in other countries," said Hugh Wire, director of the West Coast office of the U.S. Protestant Church World Service, another relief agency. "But they bring in a strictly American version of what the problems are—and what to do about them. It's a terribly imperialistic approach, devoid of any understanding of local conditions."

On June 30, spokesmen claiming to represent more than 100,000 Salvadoran refugees in Honduras and Guatemala issued a statement alleging that World Vision collaborated with the military of all three countries in a political counter-insurgency campaign directed at the refugees. Spokesman Father Fausto Milla, pastor of the border-area parish of Corquin, said that the organization's staff members "landed helicopters in places where there were large concentrations of refugees, and told them communism is your enemy and it has ruined everything in Honduras."

Sister Irma, a Franciscan nun in Santa Rosa de Copan responsible for coordinating CARITAS programs along the border, insisted that World Vision also recruits staff members who have worked for the Honduran Department of Investigative Police.

Perhaps the most severe charge against World Vision—and one which is raised constantly by relief workers here—is that the group allows troops from the Salvadoran armed forces and the paramilitary organization Orden to enter its camps in search of suspected guerrillas. Similar reports have reached the Catholic-affiliated Washington Office on Latin America and other U.S.-based religious humanitarian organizations.

CIA CONNECTIONS

This is not the first time that such charges have been levelled against World Vision. During the Vietnam War, it was criticized for allegedly passing intelligence information on to U.S. military personnel, who were not allowed to enter refugee camps. In Cambodia, according to a 1979 article in *Christian Century*, at least "75 percent of [World Vision's] operation was funded by the U.S. AID [Agency for International Development]. American military trucks and helicopters were always available for World Vision programs, and the CIA used information obtained from the group's field workers as part of its normal intelligence function."

Since the organization's founding in 1950, it has expanded to mount operations in 85 countries, most notably those where refugee populations have grown in the wake of political revolution.

World Vision categorically denies that the organization has acted in collaboration with the military, stating that "these are old, oft-repeated charges dating back to the 1960s."

The controversy can not be so easily dismissed, however. Essentializing the differences between the two religious perspectives, Sister Irma says: "Our conflict is not religious, it is political. It is a question of the theology of liberation against the theology of repression."